

Proofs of Providence

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[0:00] Well, we're studying the mystery of providence by the Puritan John Flavel, and he is setting before us certain proofs of God's providence.

That our world is not just ordered, or I shouldn't say ordered, that our world is not just spinning out events by coincidence and chance and natural law and natural causes, but there is a gracious God who is ordering all things for the good of his people.

And so he's setting forth these proofs, things that defy the claim that it can all be explained just by natural forces. We don't need a God to explain what's happening in the world today, as if these natural forces are operating independently of an all-wise and all-powerful God.

So Flavel's asking a series of questions. We've looked at one of them, and it was this. How has it happened that so many great mercies and deliverances have come to the people of God by working against the course of natural causes?

So that's what we saw last week. The second question that we take off with this week is, how is it that the saints' affairs are not ordered by a special divine providence when we see what you call natural causes uniting together for their relief and benefit in so strange a manner as never otherwise happens?

[1:35] That we see all kinds of details happening in a manner that helps God's people, and it happens in an unusual, remarkable way that doesn't otherwise happen.

So Joseph's life is our example. What was the beneficial end goal? If we can say, what was God's plan and the benefit that he meant to bring to his people through Joseph's life?

What was the end benefit? Anybody? Talking about Joseph back in Genesis. Okay.

So we have the chosen people of God, the family of Jacob, and the plan is to keep them alive on the earth because there would be a famine.

So the end goal is to lift Joseph up to where he is the head of the whole land of Egypt, where there will be grain, that he might keep alive his chosen people and save a lot of other people along with them.

[2:51] So that's the end. Now, the plan had 12 steps which all worked together, and you could divide it into probably 15 or 10 steps depending on how you divide it.

Flavel says 12 steps that all worked together in a remarkable way to bring it about. And it's like 12 links in a chain. If only one link failed, then in all likelihood, the outcome would have failed as well. But each one occurred in its order and exact timing and place to bring about the blessed end. So we're going to look at those 12 interlocking links in Joseph's life very briefly.

First, there was Daddy Jacob's favoritism to Joseph, which incurred the wrath of his brothers and made them jealous. And that hatred was increased by his dreams of them bowing down to him. And all of that stirred up their hatred and desire and plan to murder him. Here comes that dreamer. Let's kill him.

[4:02] Now think, if they had killed him, the plan would have failed. So that's the first link. They didn't kill him. Well, how was it that they didn't kill him? Well, someone's stomach was growling, and so they delayed their plan.

We'll do the dirty deed after lunch. So they sit down and have lunch. Link three. But while they're eating, a caravan of Ishmaelite traders are passing by, and they're heading for, of all places, Egypt. And if they had passed by an hour or two earlier, Joseph wouldn't have even been there yet. And if they had passed by an hour or two later, Joseph would have already been dead.

So, at just the right time, as they're eating lunch, here come these Ishmaelite traders. Think of everything that had to happen to pull off that perfect timing.

I don't know where all those guys were roaming, those nomadic traders, but they arrived at just the right time as Joseph is down in the pit and his brothers are eating before they kill him.

[5:13] The fourth link. The brothers changed their minds. And instead of killing him for nothing, let's sell them and get something out of him.

Was it due to some of the fancy wares that caught their eye in the caravan? That here they come and they saw what they had? Oh, it'd be nice to have that. Hey, what can we give for that? Well, we've got a guy here, our brother.

So, the plan changes. Fifth link. The fact that as the Ishmaelites took him to Egypt and went to the slave auction and were selling off Joseph, that that day that they sold him, there would be one of Pharaoh's officials, Potiphar, the keeper of the guard, who would be shopping for a slave that day and would give the high bid for Joseph.

If somebody had outbidded him, again, the chain would have been broken. But Potiphar bought Joseph and took him home.

The sixth link. The fact that God so blessed Joseph in Potiphar's house, that as he worked his fields, blessing and success came upon all that he did, that Potiphar brought him into his house and said, you will run my whole household.

[6:33] I won't know about anything except the food I eat. Everything else is in your hands. So, he's brought into the house where he will come into contact with Potiphar's wife who will lust after him and tempt him and will be refused by him and she will falsely accuse him.

All this happened to incense her husband, Potiphar, enough to throw Joseph in prison.

And not just any prison, but the prison where the king's prisoners were kept. Link seven. The fact that God so blessed Joseph in prison that he's put in charge of all the jail and has close contact then with all the other prisoners in that place.

Link eight. The fact that Pharaoh's own chief cupbearer and chief baker offended their master and were thrown into the same prison where Joseph was. What did they do?

We're not told. They did something. If it had been a little less, then maybe they wouldn't have got thrown in prison. If they'd done a little worse, maybe they'd have been beheaded without prison.

[7:44] But they did just the right thing to offend him enough to not kill them, but get them thrown into prison. Well, not kill them yet. You know the story. So here they are in prison and they're in the prison where Joseph is.

And then link nine. They dream dreams, which God enabled Joseph to interpret for them and everything happens just as they had dreamed. And then link ten. When the chief cupbearer, the baker was executed, the chief cupbearer, was restored to his service in Pharaoh's court, he forgot something.

He forgot to mention to Pharaoh about this guy in prison named Joseph who interpreted the dream perfectly for him.

Well, the timing was not yet right, was it? So he's forgotten for another two years, molding away down in prison because it wasn't the right time for him to be introduced to Pharaoh.

Link 11 in the chain. Then when Pharaoh had dreamed, had his own dreams, and no one could interpret them, the cupbearer's memory is jogged. Oh, yes.

[8:59] I've been wrong for two years. I forgot to tell you something. There is a Hebrew in prison who can interpret dreams. He interpreted our dreams.

Remember me and the baker and so on. And so Joseph, Pharaoh, is now most interested in meeting this Joseph and sends for him.

And Joseph has an audience with Pharaoh. And then link number 12 gives him the interpretation. Joseph, the interpretation of Pharaoh's dream. But gives him something more.

He gives him favor with Pharaoh to make Joseph the man in charge of all the people in Egypt. So, the rest is history as we say.

But can you see how God's 12-link plan is fulfilled to keep Jacob's family alive? That was the goal at the end. But there were 12 links in the chain.

[9:56] And with the goal of keeping Jacob's family alive, which was itself a link in the chain of bringing forth the Messiah to save you and me from our sins.

There's this ongoing linkage of everything in God's universe to bring about his plans. But in these 12 plans, if any one of those links would have broken down, it could have scrapped the whole plan.

And very often, in every one of those links, there were probably another dozen or a hundred things that could have gone wrong to cause it to be broken.

So, Flavel says, the uniting together of these many events to bring about a favorable benefit, something good for God's people, is too wonderful just to write it all down to chance.

It just was a coincidence that all this happened, that things work together in so strange a manner that never otherwise happens. Rather, an invisible hand is guiding and attaching each link to the next link to bring about his plan.

[11:10] So, to change the metaphor, we walk into a room and we find a beautiful life-size sculpture of a horse in wood and we say, how did this happen?

And there's a bag. We open the bag and we look in and there's chisels and hammers and files. And we'll say, wow, could it happen that these tools did that?

And we say, no, there's too many details for it just to happen some chaotic way with just these instruments.

No, there was a hand that took those instruments and worked every detail so that the horse resembles a real horse and so on.

And so it is that these events that fall out, you can't just say, well, they just happen. No, the detail and the timing and the working together of them argues for the invisible hand of providence.

[12:14] So that's the third or the second proof that Flavel gives of providence. The same could be done with the book of Esther and you could go through that and Flavel says there's seven links in that story to bring about good to the Jews.

But the third argument or proof for providence, if there is not the hand of providence behind it, how are the most powerful means employed to destroy God's people rendered ineffective while the weakest of means employed for their defense and comfort are found successful?

These are long sentences and we're used to two-word sentences and such. But here's what he's saying. He's saying that if it's just natural causes and chance, then you would expect the weaker means used to be the most ineffective and you would expect the most powerful means to be the more effective.

But Flavel says providence crosses her hands. And what we have is the weakest means are proven to be the most effective while the strongest are proven to be the most ineffective.

So let's look first at the most powerful means that have been employed to destroy God's people and see how they've proven to be ineffective. He starts with Pharaoh. He's the head of a mighty empire of Egypt and he had set himself to destroy God's people and to wipe out this race.

[13:59] And he ruthlessly afflicted them with servile labor. But the more he afflicted them, the more they multiplied. And so he tells the Hebrew midwives to kill the baby boys being born.

That way we won't have this multiplication. That's frustrated. He tells all of his people to throw the Hebrew baby boys into the river. He's got a huge army to enforce his law and still they multiplied and grew stronger.

Later he tries to destroy this nation in other ways. You remember chasing them at the Red Sea and so on. They're just a bunch of slaves. And he's Pharaoh.

They have this mighty nation with a mighty chariot corps and army at his disposal. And if things are only falling out according to natural causes, well then there would be no surviving Israelites in Egypt because of the mighty power of Pharaoh.

So their preservation is a work of providence, an amazing providence. They're like that bush that was on fire and yet it wasn't consumed. That's strange.

[15:08] Bushes usually burn up. That's strange. A mighty instrument like Pharaoh usually could easily destroy the Israelites, a weak people.

And then Flavel talks about the mighty Roman Empire. They crushed nations with their power and then they turned its force against the Christian church and sought to obliterate the church.

And so the first 300 years after Christ's resurrection were 10 periods of persecution. It was the killing times for Christians in the Roman Empire.

But what happened? The blood of the martyrs became the what? Seed of the church. And so rather than stamping out the Christians they grew in number and in influence.

That's not natural. Powerful nations destroy weaker people. The Medes and the Persians toppled the Babylonians. The Greeks then swallowed up the Persians.

[16 : 15] And Rome mighty Rome then destroyed the Greeks. But they can't destroy the Christian church. That's not natural.

The Lord's providence foils the plans of the nations and thwarts the purposes of the peoples. Because the Lord has declared no weapon forged against you shall prosper.

Isaiah 54 17. Even the powerful gates of hell cannot prevail against the church. Powerful means ineffective against the church.

Then think of the weak and inconsequential instruments that God has used to effectively build his church. Think of the twelve disciples.

Who were they? They were not mighty, noble, wise men as the world thought. They were just ordinary people. Fishermen, tradesmen.

[17 : 20] And yet God used these weak instruments to turn the world upside down with the gospel, to build the church, to spread Christianity throughout the different kingdoms of the world.

Think about the mere shouts of Israel at the walls of Jericho. what a weak instrument. People shouting, and the walls come tumbling down. Think of Gideon's 300 people and 300 soldiers, and they've got, what, lanterns, pitchers, and trumpets.

And they put to flight a huge Gideonite army. Flavel talks about a Protestant town surrounded by a Roman Catholic army, and under the cover of darkness, they were making their attack at midnight when a drunken drummer going to bed, not knowing what he was doing, rang the alarm bell to the town and aroused them to defense at just the right time.

What a weak instrument, a drunken drummer who happened to pull the alarm, to sound the alarm, to wake up the city and save them from a powerful enemy that was attacking. There was a Christian named Dumoulin during the bloody Paris massacre who took refuge from his persecutors in an oven, hiding for his life, but it was an open oven, but a spider, something as weak as a spider, wove a web over the face of that oven to hide him from the enemy that was searching for him.

Weak instruments used for the good of God's people, effectively used when powerful instruments to destroy the church have been so ineffective.

[19 : 08] It all argues for a providence, not just natural explanation. Question four. If all things happen by natural causes, not by providence, then how is it that like a ball which strikes another, and I think it's kind of like pool or croquet or something, when you see a ball striking another, maybe a ball is moving one direction and another ball hits it and sends it off another direction.

He says, how is it that like a ball when it strikes another, men are turned out some evil way along which they were driving at full speed? So they've got a goal in mind, it's some evil, and they're pursuing it full speed, and then something happens to knock them off of their course.

So he speaks of Balaam, and Balaam is greedy for gain, and he wants money. And he'll curse the Israelites in order to get some money. And try as he will, when he opens his mouth, all that will tumble out is blessing upon Israel.

Saul of Tarsus breathing out slaughter against the church. He's on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians there, and he meets the risen Christ, and he's turned away from his wicked goal, and he becomes a preacher of Christ who's persecuted for the very one he sought to persecute.

He speaks of Augustine who was going to teach the people of a certain town, and he took a guide along with him to show him the way. Well, the guide missed the usual road and unknowingly took a bypass.

[20 : 50] But because of that, they later learned that Augustine had escaped death by the hands of bloody Donatists, those were heretics who were lying in wait to kill him on that road.

So, who can fail to see the finger of God turning away men who were bent on doing harm to God's people? Proverbs 16, 9, In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps.

And these men had an evil plan in their hearts, but it was the Lord's hand of providence that determined and turned their steps. The fifth argument, if there is no overruling providence ordering all things for the good of God's people, then why when good and evil are done to them, is it accordingly repaid into the laps of those who so treated them?

If things just happen by chance, why is it you can see in the history of God's people that when people have mistreated them, they have been mistreated, and when people have helped them, they have been helped.

He speaks first of the kindness as done to repay those who have been shown kindness to the Lord's people, that God has repaid kindness back into their laps, those Hebrew midwives that we just spoke of that were commanded by the Pharaoh of Egypt to kill the baby boys as they were being born.

[22 : 22] But they feared God and they let them live. The scriptures say, so God was kind to the midwives. So they were kind to God's people and he was kind to them.

And because they feared God, he gave them families of their own. The picture seems to be that they didn't have children of their own and they were midwives helping the other Hebrew mothers give birth and so on.

And God was so pleased with the kindness they showed to his people that he was kind and gave them children of their own. And then we have that Shunammite woman who was kind to God's prophet Elijah, remember, or it was Elisha, and she fed him and kept him there in their home.

And God rewarded her by giving her a son. Again, that's not just a switch that you turn on and off. The Lord gives children and it was after she showed a kindness to God's prophet that God opened her womb and gave her a son that she so desired.

Publius, the chief official in the island of Malta, Acts 28, remember, he welcomed Paul, the shipwrecked Paul and his company, he welcomed them into his home and for three days he entertained them hospitably.

[23 : 44] And the kindness was returned to this man in that his father was healed from his fever and dysentery. So we see kindness is being returned to those who are kind to God's people.

And on the other hand, evil is done to God's people have been repaid with evil. So God comes to Pharaoh and the Egyptians and says, let my people go.

Israel is my son, let my people go. And they persecuted God's son. So what did he do to their firstborn sons? In one night, he killed every firstborn son.

Evil paid back. And build a gallows to hang godly Mordecai, the Jew. Instead, who was hung on that gallows? He himself and his ten sons.

We see retribution coming back. Charles IX was said to most inhumanely make the very canals of Paris flow with Protestant blood.

[24 : 52] And soon after he died, a miserable death, with his own blood flowing from all parts of his body. Stephen Gardner burnt so many of God's servants at the stake, and he himself was scorched by fire such that his tongue was black and hung out of his mouth in dreadful torments, he ended his wretched days.

All to say there's a God who is judging in the affairs of men. We sang it last week, for he still reigns and will bring low the proudest foe that him disdains.

And so we see this happening in history. Is it just chance that these things happen when God's people are either helped or harmed? Sometimes God has made the very place of sinning the very place of punishment, as if to say, this didn't just happen by chance.

So, you remember King Ahab, what was his sin against the people of God when he looked out his window and said, I want that vineyard. Oh, well, that belongs to Naboth.

No, not Naboth, Naboth. What did he do to Naboth? He murdered him. And God said to King Ahab, in the place where dogs lick the blood of Naboth, in the place where dogs lick the blood of Naboth, shall dogs lick your blood.

[26 : 28] That sounds, I mean, if that kind of thing happens, what's the chances of that happening? And so, Ahab's out in battle, he's disguised himself so that the enemy won't know he's king.

Some archer lets an arrow fly. We talked about that in our message on Providence. And the arrow comes and just lands right in the chink of his armor. He says to his chariot driver, get me out of here.

I'm wounded. He takes him. Blood flows out of his body into that chariot. Later, he dies, and that chariot is washed out in the very same place where Naboth's blood was shed.

Fulfilling the prophecy in the place. And so, in such dramatic fashion, God is proving something.

This retribution coming back upon those who attack my people doesn't just happen, but my hand is behind it.

Tophet was the place where the Jews had offered their sons to the god Moloch in the fire. fire. And so, Tophet becomes the burial place in Jeremiah 7, the burial place for the Jews until there was no more room to bury them.

[27:47] There was a man, Nightingale, who was up in a pulpit abusing the scriptures, not up in a pulpit like that, but up in a crow's nest pulpit, and he's making fun of the scriptures. And in the very place where he's making fun of the scriptures, he tumbles out to his death below.

These are some of the signs that if a man digs a pit, he will fall into it. If a man rolls a stone, it will roll back on him, Proverbs 26, 27. Now, it's true that not all wickedness is repaid here and now. There's enough that isn't that causes grief to the righteous, but there is enough of it that is repaid to show that God is judge over all, and his hand is indeed paying back into the laps of both evildoer and well doer according to their deeds.

Proof number six, if all things that happen are merely accidental, how is it that things happen in such exact accord with the predictive prophecies of scripture? Now, we just had one with regard to the place of Ahab's blood being spilt, world, but that's true of all predictive prophecy.

If everything is just happening by chance, how is it that we can read things that were spoken hundreds and thousands of years before and then see that they happened exactly like the prophet said?

[29:19] If there's no hand guiding it, how does that happen? So, we're 700 years before Christ. God announces to the world through his prophet, Micah, where the Messiah is to be born.

Where is that? Bethlehem. Where does Mary and Joseph, where do Mary and Joseph live? Nazareth?

Galilee? You know how far that is from Bethlehem? About 70 miles? You say, well, that's just an hour drive. Well, not really.

Unless you're driving that donkey awful hard. How's that plan going to be fulfilled? They don't live in Bethlehem. They live in Nazareth. How does God get that worked out?

Anybody? Taxes. You say, that's just an ordinary thing. Oh, yeah, what is it? that in the year that Quirinius was governor of Syria, Caesar Augustus, passes a law that all should be taxed.

[30:34] And they would need to go back to their city of birth. And Joseph also went up from Galilee out of the city of Nazareth into Judea, into the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David.

And he went there to be taxed with Mary, his espoused wife, who was then great with child. And so it was that while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.

And she brought forth her firstborn son and named him Jesus. So, the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord and he directs it like a water course wherever he wants.

I need to get Mary and Joseph down to Bethlehem so that Messiah will be born there, just like I said 700 years ago by the prophet Micah.

Is God bringing his hand saying, oh, I don't know how this is going to work out? No. Caesar Augustus' heart is in his hand. And he may have been motivated by greed.

[31:42] And God uses all that greed in his heart and whatever other issues. I want to build a bigger army. Well, I'm going to need money. Well, whatever it was, God used it to issue a tax through this king to get Joseph and Mary down to Bethlehem.

All fulfillment of predictive prophecies argues that the God who announces his plan in advance is the same God who controls all the events in his world to see that his plans are fulfilled down to the very detail.

A powerful argument for providence. And number seven, how do these things happen so remarkably in the nick of time if there's a natural cause behind them?

Here it's the exact timing that we are appreciating to see that such precision is not the mark of coincidence but the mark of intelligence.

Just a little earlier or a little later and the outcome would have been completely different. We saw that with Joseph and the Midianite or the Ishmaelite traders. I think we've seen it recently when we were talking about the time when Saul is chasing David and he's just ready to nab him and just at the time when he's about to grab David he gets a message that the Philistines have attacked.

[33:14] Now some messenger had to bring him that message. You start thinking about that. So what? Well he's running with a message for the king.

How fast is he running? What does that depend upon? What he ate for breakfast? How is he sick or healthy? Or the kind of terrain he's running through? But it's all worked out so he arrives at just the time when Saul's about to swallow David up.

Oh I've got to retreat and fight against the Philistines. The timing of it. So Abraham has his knife uplifted and he is just about ready to kill his son Isaac.

And at just the right time he said stop Abraham Abraham stop. And there's that ram that is presented as the offering instead.

The timing just at the right time. Think of Haman's plot against the Jews in the book of Esther. He hates Mordecai.

[34 : 20] He hates him so bad that he can't be happy in his home with his wife and family until Mordecai's dead. And so Haman's wife says well come on you're the powerful man in government.

Why are you so sad? If you want Mordecai dead then build a gallows for him and go tomorrow morning and talk to the king and ask him to have Mordecai hanged.

End of story. The next verse says on that night the king could not sleep.

So it's the very night before Haman is coming in the morning to ask for the head of Mordecai the Jew and on that night the king can't sleep.

Bummer. Wonder what happened. What caused that? He calls for something to be read to him. It's the annals of his reign. And he learns that there was a man that once saved him from an assassination attempt.

[35 : 25] His name is Mordecai. Say, has anything ever been done to honor this man? And the scribe says, no. We must fix that tomorrow morning. We'll fix that. Tomorrow morning comes and here comes Haman.

And before he can ask for the head of Mordecai the king says, you know I was reading last night and there's a man in our kingdom that saved my life from assassins and I want to honor him in fact I want you to be the one to honor him.

I want you to put him on a horse and dress him out in royal regalia and I want you to lead him through the town saying this is what will be done for the man that the king loves to honor.

The exact timing. On that very night the king could not sleep. There was a Mr. Dodd who could not sleep the night but felt a strong impulse to visit his neighbor even though it was late at night.

As he arrived at his door his neighbor was leaving with a holder in his pocket to go out and hang himself. He was able to intervene and save his life just at the nick of time.

[36 : 31] speak of Elijah and the woman at Zarephath and the drink of water and some bread just before they die and how does fix one for me and the Lord will not let your jar of oil or flour run dry until the day the Lord gives rain on the land and so on.

Just in time she was going to eat her last meal and die. It happened. That's the seventh and the last argument he gives. If these things are just coincidental why is it that they happen in answer to the prayers of the saints?

So when does the Red Sea divide in front of Israel? It's when Israel cried out to the Lord for help. Coincidence? It wasn't splitting on its own but when they cried it split.

Victory comes to Israel when King Asaph cries, help us O Lord our God in 2 Chronicles 14. It was when Mordecai and Esther fast and pray that Haman's plot comes unraveled and falls apart.

Genesis 24 It was Abraham's servant that prayed for success in finding a wife for his master's son. God answered remember in providing Rachel to offer to water the camels.

[38 : 00] If you haven't read the story read it in Genesis 24. James is beheaded by Herod and the Jews praise Herod for doing such and he arrests Peter. He's going to do the same with Peter right after the weekend and the church.

He's praying and Peter's let out of prison. Elijah prays and it stops raining. He prays again three and a half years later and it starts raining.

And I trust you have your own answers to prayer as proofs that there is a God of providence who hears and acts on behalf of those who call on him.

that is a mighty proof to you and a comfort to your heart that there is indeed a God who orders all things and controls all of his creatures and all their actions all the time for the good of us his people. Well our time is gone but that's chapter the chapter on the proofs for providence we'll move on next week God willing to the matter of God's providence in our upbringing our birth and our upbringing.